**Ebonics**

Ebonics - also known by a host of other names such as African American Vernacular English, Black English, Black Vernacular, and so on—is an African-American language that has its roots in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as African captives devised the means to communicate with each other and with their captors. In the South of the United States, these Pan-African languages ​​co-mingled with Standard English and the Southern dialect. Many uniquely African-American components have arisen over the last two centuries, and all of these influences have forged what is now known as Ebonics.

In 1996, debates around the nature of 'Ebonics' in the United States came to a head. That year, the Oakland Unified School District in California enacted Resolution 597-003, which officially recognised that African-American students 'as part of their culture' and history as African people possess and utilize a language'. Alternatively referred to as Ebonics (literally 'black sounds'), African Communication Behaviours, and African Language Systems, this language was declared to be 'genetically-based' rather than a dialect of Standard English.

Within the profession of language research and pedagogy, a strong consensus formed behind the OUSD's decision to recognise Ebonics. Linguistics professor John Rickford noted that Ebonics was not simply characterised by erroneous grammar and a large slang vocabulary, but that underlying this language was a structured form and process of grammar and phonology that made English learning for Ebonics speakers far more complex a task than simply dropping bad habits. English teachers, Rickford counselled, must therefore accept and embrace these complexities.

The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) concurred with Rickford, adding that whether or not Ebonics should be defined as a dialect or a language does not matter in terms of its 'validity'. While linguists studying Ebonics typically restrain from prescribing edicts in favour of tracking changes in form and style, the LSA did point to the fact that speakers of Swedish and Norwegian can typically understand each other while conversing in different 'languages' whereas Mandarin and Cantonese speakers cannot understand each other's 'dialects' to conclude that spatial and social tensions, rather than strict linguistic criteria, were the crucial factors in defining these terms.

For many others, however, the OUSD's decision was tantamount to endorsing lazy, vulgar and 'broken' English—the equivalent, perhaps, of acknowledging 'txt' speak or Internet slang as a valid form of expression. Recognising and fostering the use of informal, culturally-specific spoken language, say these detractors, traps users in a kind of linguistic ghetto in which they can interact with other disenfranchised and excluded citizens, but cannot engage within the public sphere in a meaningful way. Because of the dominance of Standard English in the United States, Ebonics-only speakers are essentially unable to go to university and work in high-valued professions, and they are unlikely to be electable to any kind of public office (even in areas with a high density of black residents ,those who lose their Ebonics-tinged speech patterns tend to be more trusted).

Psychology professor Ladonna Lewis Rush has noted, however, that the OUSD's resolution did not promote Ebonics instruction as an alternative to Standard English in an either-or approach, but was intended to provide a better springboard for black achievement in English education. The systematic de-valuation of Ebonics in American society parallels, Rush has argued, the de-valuation of African-Americans in general. While a demeaning attitude can lead to social exclusion, teachers are suggested to think inclusively and encourage Ebonics speakers to use and celebrate their way of speaking while understanding that the language of the workplace, and of academics, is Standard English. Nobel Prize-winning journalist Toni Morrison has also found a reciprocal, mutually enriching use for both Ebonics and Standard English. 'There are certain ideas and ways of thinking I cannot say without recourse to my [Ebonics] language...I know the Standard English. I want to use it to restore the other language, the lingua franca.'

In the media, the Ebonics controversy has mostly been portrayed as a revival of black-versus-white confrontation—this time over linguistic differences—but journalist Joan Walsh thinks there are basic elements inherent in the dispute that people do not want to openly discuss. She considers that there is increasing resentment by black parents and teachers who see enormous amounts of federal and state support going into Asian and Latino bilingual programmes. As immigration continues to increase, a greater proportion of the school budget is going into these programmes. The question has to be raised:why should immigrant children get English-language assistance as well as reinforcement of their own language and culture while native-born African-Americans get no such resources? Walsh maintains inner city black children are more isolated than in the past and have less social interaction with those fluent in Standard English. For this reason they need help by trained teachers to translate the native tongue they hear at home into the English of the classroom.

Ebonics should be treated as a black contribution to culture in the way that jazz and rock-and-roll has been welcomed—the new vocabulary and imagery has added to the American language rather than devalued it. In Walsh's eyes there has always been 'white mistrust of how black people handle their business', but 'in the public realm, white disdain yields black intransigence more reliable than 'i' comes before 'e'.